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COMMENTARY ON LESZEK KOLAKOWSKI'S 'INTELLECTUALS, YOUTH, IDEOLO--ETC(U)

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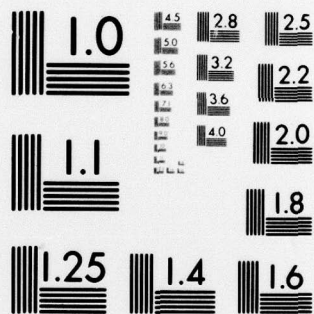
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6 COMMENTARY

on

Leszek Kolakowski's "Intellectuals, Youth, Ideology"

by

10 Melvin Croan

The University of Wisconsin-Madison

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My assignment, as I understand it, is two-fold: first, to comment on some of the general issues broached by Leszek Kolakowski's presentation and, second, to contribute some observations and reflections on the situation in the DDR (East Germany), the country on which I am said to enjoy the somewhat dubious distinction of special competence. The first part of my assignment is relatively easy. I find myself in broad agreement with Kolakowski's overall interpretation and I especially applaud the emphasis he accords to unpredictable circumstances and unforeseeable contingencies as possible determinants of the future of Eastern Europe. Therefore, I shall confine myself to a few specific points where I would differ with him in emphasis if not in substance.

The first of these involves Kolakowski's notion of the "underground of culture," embedded, as he puts it, in popular social psychology about which, he further suggests, we can know almost nothing in the absence of a major upheaval or -- to paraphrase Hannah Arendt's poignant characterization of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution -- a "true event" providing instant illumination of previously impenetrable recesses. Leaving aside the question of whether other "true events" of this magnitude can be expected in the future, I am troubled by the implication that these "subterranean cultural regions" are somehow immutable. Far from being

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fully predetermined or unalterably prefixed by national history and traditional political culture, the "subterranean regions" may be undergoing some subtle but significant changes as the result of the socio-economic modernization (if that much overused word is the correct one in this context) that has been achieved by particular Communist regimes in the area. However that may be, for the "underground of culture" to amount to anything more than an elemental, explosive force, it would have to be harnessed and directed by counter-elites. This, in turn, begs the question of the degree of congruence between potential counter-elites' values, aspirations, and goals and those that may issue forth from the depths of popular social psychology. But perhaps all these matters are best left with the general observation that we are dealing here with potentially crucial phenomena that necessarily remain quite elusive.

Turning to a second matter, I would quarrel with Kolakowski's blanket assertion that throughout the whole of Eastern Europe, "ideology is nearly dead." To be sure, "the end of ideology" has been debated to death in the West and ideological agnosticism is unquestionably quite widespread and far advanced throughout Eastern Europe, nowhere more so, perhaps, than in Poland. But, speaking generally, I find it much more instructive to stress a somewhat dif-

ferent, although related point: namely, the transformation in the role of Marxist-Leninist ideology from an action-directed belief system motoring socio-economic change to a pliant bureaucratic instrumentality for the enforcement of socio-political discipline. In this connection, one should take note of a certain "refunctionalization" -- and to that extent, revitalization -- of ideology, of which East Germany provides a prime but probably not the only case in point. Furthermore, it strikes me as somewhat anachronistic to invoke the absence of "a single [ideological] authority." This may well have been the case for the Khrushchev era but it overlooks the Brezhnev leadership's rather strenuous efforts of the last five years to reimpose Soviet-centered ideological coordination as a counter to détente with the West. Of course, the success of Moscow's ministrations may vary from country to country and their very future beyond the tenure in office of the present Soviet leadership is yet another matter. But any realistic assessment of Eastern Europe today must take account of Moscow's comprehensive program of integration in all spheres, including the ideological.

Finally, a brief comment may be in order on the tone of resignation that pervades Kolakowski's entire presentation. I recall a piece that appeared in the Archives Européennes de Sociologie (Vol. XXII, No. 1, 1971) as a

rejoinder to Zygmunt Bauman's pessimistic assessment of "Social Dissent in the East European Political System." Entitled, "A Pleading for Revolution," the rejoinder in question made the sound point, among others, that "there is no 'objective' possibility of success [of social struggle] completely independent of the belief of people that success is possible. In social transformations what people can perform depends in part on what they believe they can achieve." As the author of these lines was none other than Leszek Kolakowski, one wonders whether he now regards the moral crisis of dissent in Eastern Europe to have become even more debilitating than the ideological crisis of regime that he presently depicts for us.

Moving on, then, to the specific situation in East Germany, one might begin by asking: where is the dissent? Two individual dissidents, the physical chemist turned revisionist philosopher, Robert Havemann, and the iconoclastic chansonnier, Wolf Biermann, have long enjoyed a reputation greater by far beyond the Wall than what would be justified by their actual influence inside the DDR. To be sure, each man has his circle of disciples but it is tiny and subjected to constant surveillance and repeated harrassment. (That Havemann and Biermann themselves have thus far escaped anything worse than occasional interrogation and periods of

virtual house arrest can be attributed to their skillful cultivation of journalistic and other contacts with the West for the purpose of self-protection.) Heterodox opinions doubtless exist elsewhere but they have largely remained the carefully guarded private property of individuals, entirely devoid of socio-political consequence. It may well be the case, as a young East German foreign policy specialist who recently defected to the West has suggested, that almost all of the regime's active critics are either in prison, have fled to the West, or else committed suicide. (Interestingly enough, the DDR ceased publication of suicide statistics in 1956.)

The grim intellectual quiescence that characterizes the DDR under Honecker as it did under Ulbricht ever since 1956 must be attributed to something more than simply the efficacy of the police-state apparatus. In the first instance, unlike Slavic Europe, traditional German political culture experienced no ascriptive claims to political influence on the part of a self-conscious intelligentsia. On the contrary, the German historical experience was marked by a deep-seated cleavage between Geist and Macht. This legacy continues to militate against any self-assertiveness on the part of critical members of the humanistic intelligentsia. It has also greatly facilitated their social isolation as a group by a regime that simultaneously showed

the good sense of co-opting the talents of the technical intelligentsia into the ranks of the ruling elite. Far from comprising a "counter-elite," the technocrats who have been awarded high policy-making positions, have always manifested the requisite ideologico-political commitment -- something, again, that is scarcely surprising in view of the German tradition of bureaucratic expertise at the service of established political authority. Moreover, the entire political elite has consistently practiced the restrictive precepts of democratic centralism to the hilt. Ever conscious of the inherent challenge to domestic stability posed by Germany's national division -- a factor that has increased rather than diminished in importance with this decade's détente between the DDR and the Federal Republic, the top leadership has always taken effective care that differences of opinion, to say nothing of political in-fighting remain entirely in camera. A leadership thus encapsulated offers scant opportunity of access to proponents of dissident points of view.

How, then, to assess the viability of the social bases of the political stability that the DDR seems to enjoy today? The discerning visitor to East Germany will encounter manifestations of enthusiastic support for the system as well as instances of total rejection of it. Both phenomena are likely to be misleading, at least to the extent to

which they may suggest a sharp polarization of opinion at the extremes and deflect attention away from the much more significant if problematic middle ground.

As for the extremes, one takes the form of rather primitive outpourings of unconditional affirmation, for reasons of opportunism, genuine belief or some subconscious combination of both, on the part of people, largely but not exclusively young, who are popularly known as the "one hundred fifty percenters" or else as the "ideological idiots." The other, characterized by a complete suspension of belief in everything that bears the cachet of official authority, occurs chiefly among the middle-aged and elderly but extends beyond those who are materially disadvantaged to include individuals whose positions may afford them a quite comfortable standard of living.

In between these extremes, East German society displays a conditioned conformism, sustained by a concern for the advancement of individual careers, something that is especially pronounced among the young, and further animated by the quest for the satisfaction of private consumer demands, which is egregiously widespread through the entire society. All told, the dominant mood can be described as apolitical, or, perhaps more accurately, post-political. This the regime has been willing to accept, although grudgingly, for it remains officially committed, of course, to

much more. The dangers of settling for less are only too apparent. The expansion of career opportunities, a phenomenon of the sixties, may now be a thing of the past with the marked slowing down of the once impressive rate of growth of the East German economy. Similarly, the satisfaction of consumer demands has once again become a problem. Quite apart from the growth of consumer demands beyond the East German economy's capacity to satisfy them, especially as the DDR's international trading position worsens, the fact that East Germany has already attained the highest standard of living in Eastern Europe counts for little. This is the case because the standard of popular comparison is not with Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union, but rather with West Germany. Anyone who has had occasion to converse with even a random sample of the shoppers who throng the DDR's extensive chain of Intershops, selling West German consumer goods for hard currency, cannot fail to appreciate the overpowering economic attraction still exerted by the West.

These observations would be incomplete without some consideration, however brief, of the larger and ultimately crucial question of the role of the "national question" for the future of the DDR. Here, several quite different points deserve mention. First, the regime has recently shown greater tact than before in coping with residual

national sentiments and thereby implicitly acknowledged the persistence of such sentiments. To cite two specific examples: official claims in behalf of the DDR as a distinct, full-fledged "socialist nation" have now been qualified by the more realistic or at least less objectionable stipulation that a long historical process of the formation of a separate East German nation is under way and the intensive propaganda campaign aimed at total Abgrenzung from West Germany has been conspicuously soft-pedalled. (Both of these tactical shifts occurred in the wake of extensive secret polling of public opinion that probably suggested a counterproductive reaction to official propaganda. Apparently, the typical reaction to Abgrenzung consisted of disarming observations to the effect of "so what else is new?" -- "Wir sind doch seit langem schon abgegrenzt!")

Secondly, and by way of marked contrast, within the ranks of the SED party elite and as concerns certain specialized East German bureaucracies, especially those dealing with military, security, ideological, and COMECON affairs, "socialist internationalism" may perform a real social function by offering alternative forms of identification and commitment to compensate for the absence of a national base with genuine historical roots. If various West German elites have discovered that their "vocation for Europe"

constitutes an allegiance that supersedes loyalty to the nation-state, something comparable has been unmistakably at work in East Germany as well. It gains in practical significance to the extent to which Soviet-centered "socialist internationalism" may serve, in turn, to enhance the position actually enjoyed by the DDR and individual East German functionaries within the various institutional arenas of the Soviet-led "Socialist community of states."

However that may be, it would be premature to conclude that the "national question" is well on the way to being resolved to anything like the full satisfaction of East Germany's ruling elite. Indeed, if it takes history as any guide, the DDR leadership must be disquieted by the knowledge that national consciousness has lain dormant for long periods of time only to reemerge once again as a powerful political force, even in instances where it had apparently been replaced by other sources of social identification. To guard against this eventuality, the present leadership seems destined not only to perpetuate strict political control but also to continue to propagate rigid ideological orthodoxy. As Karl Marx scathingly remarked with respect to an earlier, rather different German Ideology, "the real, practical dissolution of these phrases, the removal of these notions from the consciousness of men, will... be effected by altered circumstances, not by theoretical

deductions." Yet, as Kolakowski rightly cautions, the precise shape of such altered circumstances simply cannot be foreseen at present.